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They'll release what they want us to know

Last week, the Central Intelligence Agency's own analysts said the CIA had overstated Soviet expenditures on arms. A rate of increase that had been estimated at 3 to 4 percent per year over the last six years was now believed to have been only about 2 percent. But the CIA's figures were disputed by analysts in the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency, who came up with different estimates of Soviet spending on arms.

This week, the administration is declassifying certain intelligence data it says will

bolster its case for a bigger arms budget. And the question has to be: Which intelligence data are the White House choosing to release? Different intelligence agencies provide different information, some of it contradictory, and even within the same agency the analysts who must interpret the material do not always agree on what it means.

The White House is doing what the White House and the Pentagon have always done: releasing the information most likely to support its position of the moment.

The country should be suspicious of this kind of selective declassification. It means the administration will be as careful not to disclose some data as it is eager to disclose others. Classified information is like the Bible: You can find something there to support any argument.

But that is not the only reason we should worry about this kind of manipulation. It tends to put intelligence at the service of politics. Even under the best of circumstances, there is a tendency in government to

tell the boss what the boss wants to hear; when the boss makes it clear that he is using intelligence data to support the position of the party, his subordinates tend to give him what he wants, and then the boss himself doesn't know what's going on.

Besides, if certain hitherto-secret information can be declassified to support the case for more military spending, we have a right to wonder why it was classified in the first place. And why a lot of other information still is. — L.H.